

Summer Camp in Croatia

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Editor's Comments—

Joyce L. Hunt, MD served her residency in Obstetrics and Gynecology at the John A. Burns School of Medicine - University of Hawaii. She is presently working with Ohana Physicians Group in Windward Oahu.

She received additional surgical training in Advanced Laparoscopy, Electrosurgery, Rectoscopy and Hysteroscopy, Laser Surgery, and did a clerkship in Endocrinology at the National Institutes of Health.

But more than being a well-trained and now experienced physician, Dr Hunt became involved with several interesting humanitarian projects. She was part of the Aloha Medical Mission team that went to Hue, Vietnam in November 1995. She has also worked in Calcutta, the Philippines and Kenya.

Recently she completed an extensive course, H.E.L.P. - Management of Health Emergencies in Large Populations sponsored by our medical school, the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, and the International Red Cross.

This essay and the accompanying photographs describe her experiences as camp physician and volunteer for the Island to Island Summer Camp in Jelsa, Croatia. "My experiences have contributed to my love for mankind and my commitment to medicine in Hawaii."

Thank you Dr Hunt, for sharing your aloha for the children of Croatia with us.



Dr Joyce L. Hunt "Island to Island Summer Camp."
Physician awaiting ferry to cross Adriatic Sea. Stari Grad,
Havar, Croatia. August 1995. Photo by Alysse Minkoff.

Last year I traveled from Honolulu to the island of Havar in Croatia to be a volunteer physician at a summer camp for refugee children. Havar was a wonderful island in the Adriatic Sea to have a camp. Lavender, anise, sage, and other herbs were abundant. The children could pluck and eat the blackberries and grapes which grew along the roadside. Our daily walks along the pebbled beach and to the Roman ruins allowed the children a time to open up. Darko, a 13 year old boy from Mostar, Bosnia Herzegovina, remarked how pleasant it was just to be able to stroll along the

road and not be a target. His 9 year old brother, Dario, had been grazed by sniper fire earlier this year on his way to school. "That is the price we pay for life," Darko explained. He had become used to living with daily fears of death and dying. If he knew that the War would be over in a few months, he might not venture out in the streets to go to school, but since the War would continue indefinitely, he felt that he must be educated and, therefore, was willing to take the risk that he might die while walking to school.

Branka, a Bosnian volunteer, brought 25 children from Mostar to the camp. In February she had been reunited with her 6 year old daughter, Ena, after a long 3 year separation filled with heartache and strife. During the bombing of Mostar in 1992, Branka and her husband decided it would be safer if their 3 year old daughter fled

the city with his parents. Branka and her husband stayed behind as they did not think the shelling and bombing would last long. They both had good jobs and a nice apartment and did not want to lose them. A grenade put an end to their dreams. Branka's husband was found dead on the street. Six months later she located her daughter and husband's family, who had become refugees in another part of Bosnia. Ena stayed with her grandparents for two more years until Branka felt that she could cope and adequately support her. The camp offered a bonding and healing time for them.

I first learned about the children's summer camp in April when I ran into an old acquaintance in the bank. Judith Jenya, the founder and director of the Global Children's Organization, was preparing for the 3rd annual summer camp in Croatia for orphans and refugee children from war-torn Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. I was fascinated and intrigued. We went for coffee, and Judith briefed me on the history of the organization, gave me a quick overview of the changing geography of the Balkans, and provided a synopsis of the War and its impact during the last 3 years.

In 1992, Judith had been traveling in the Balkans searching for her "roots" when she witnessed the stresses of war that children were enduring. Many of them had seen their homes destroyed, mothers raped, and friends or family killed. Feeling a need to help and possibly make a difference in the lives of these children, Judith set out to create a summer camp which might give them a temporary respite from the war, restore hope, and let them be children again. She got the idea for a summer camp from a Croatian psychologist working at an orphanage in Split. The first summer camp was held in August 1993, on the island of Badija at a Franciscan Monastery, bringing together 80 children ages 7 through 14 and volunteers from the United States, Europe, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Last year, Camp Sutej was held at Hotel Jelsa on Havar off the Dalmatian Coast. This resort island with its medieval towns seemed to be a safe location for the camp because the ferries were easily accessible and could be taken directly to Italy, if necessary, and the western part of Croatia had not been involved in fighting since 1991. That is, until 2 days prior to my departure. In a lightning offensive, the Croatian army attacked the Krajina region, the Serb stronghold in western Croatia, causing hundreds of thousands of Serbians to flee into Bosnia. Knowing of the recent history and atrocities in this War made me fearful. I could not understand how anyone could be going on holiday within Croatia, or allow their children to go to a summer camp for that matter, especially since the Croatian troops had just been called up and the fighting was in the general vicinity.

My husband took a deep breath and gave me his *aloha* as he put me on the plane to Milano, and promised not to mention my plans to anyone, especially my mother.

I met other camp volunteers enroute - artists, musicians, counselors, writers, a filmmaker and another physician, a psychiatric resident from Venice. We were elated to finally see Judith Jenya when she boarded our ferry in Split. We were able to release some of the tension that had built up during our journey. We had witnessed



Croatian refugee woman in Babushka. Jelsa, Havar, Croatia. August 1995. Photo by Dr Joyce Hunt.



"Peace" Engraved on church door. Jelsa, Havar, Croatia. August 1995. Photo by Dr Joyce Hunt.



Island to island Summer Camp. Badja, Croatia 1994. Photo by Judith Jenya.

UN trucks disembarking our ferry, wondering what they were transporting, and we had nervously passed border patrols while trying to "keep cool" or "chill out" as my kids would say. It was hard to comprehend the full effect of the war on the lives of this homogeneous appearing population.

Hotel Jelsa was originally built as a camp for Serb children but now housed 50 refugees permanently. Although it needed repair it was spacious, with breathtaking views from every angle. Rocky barren slopes erupted into green pine forests. Vineyards reflected in the clear Adriatic. The surrounding beauty overwhelmed us daily.

Upon our arrival we were introduced to some of the Junior camp counselors who were also refugees. This was our first exposure to the effect of the War on teenagers and young adults. Our purpose at the camp was to create memories and provide an outlet for the children to have fun so they could temporarily put aside their traumatized lives. It was important that we did not probe into their personal lives but let them open up to us if they chose to do so.

Jadranko and Dusko, strikingly handsome brothers whose family had resided at the refugee camp for over 2 years, had the first dramatic story that we encountered. Shortly after the onset of the War, their village, near Travnik in central Bosnia, had been bombed and raided by Muslim soldiers. The family fled but Jadranko, then an aspiring 18 year old gymnast, and his two older brothers were captured and taken prisoners to Manjaca where they experienced and witnessed the horrors of a concentration camp. Throats were slit. Mutilations, rapes, and killings were all performed in the name of ethnic cleansing and revenge. These young men were the victims of something they did not understand and may never understand. They survived the torture but were scarred for life. They were ultimately traded for other prisoners and released. Jadranko then joined the local army, initially fighting in the hills in an attempt to preserve his town and then throughout Bosnia for the next 2 years. He did not know the whereabouts of his family for at least 6 months until the Red Cross finally located them in Croatia. Although his dreams of competing as a national gymnast were shattered, he was thankful to be alive and once again be reunited with his family in Jelsa.

Dusko, the youngest brother, had escaped with his family but suffered the stigma of being a refugee. He was allowed to enroll in the local high school but had only one friend. Although a Croat, he was a refugee who had no money and therefore, he was looked down upon by the local teenagers.

Jadranko joined the camp as a volunteer with some hesitation. He knew his fluency in English would be very valuable as well as his athletic ability, but, as he confided in me, the trauma he had experienced would make it difficult for him to get close to the children. Vivid flashbacks were still present, occurring nightly.

After our brief recovery and our first of many cold showers, we held an organizational meeting. The schedule of daily activities we created included swimming, hiking, active outdoor games and sports, arts and crafts, drama, music, and the highlight of the day - evening disco. The Italian psychiatrist Dr Paniccia and I combined our efforts and organized our temporary infirmaries (our rooms), pooled our medications, and set forth our plan of action for diagnosing and treating our potential patients. Language barriers would not be a problem since half of the children could speak English and a few could speak Italian or German. The handout of Croatian-Serb words and phrases was all that was necessary to get through the day.

The children arrived the following afternoon. They beamed with unforgettable smiles. They were well dressed; their clothes were not tattered and torn, as one might expect from the connotation of the word refugee, but stylish with the names of American sportswear and heroes on almost every article of clothing. They were not maimed or obviously crippled but appeared well nourished, healthy and very attractive. The orphans from Spilt were a special group. They could not speak English so they communicated with their faces. Their smiles seldom vanished. Their eyes spoke words. They adjusted easily to the daily routine and loved to be hugged. I slowly discovered how well all of the children had buried the trauma that they had endured over the previous 3 years. Their faces did not reveal their pain. But the stories of their lives slowly unfolded as they felt comfortable with their surroundings and the volunteers.

Swimming and activity time brought everyone close together. This was a time for getting to know one another and sharing. "I am

numb," 11 year old Borsko murmured to Tom, one of the volunteers, as he was looking at the map pointing to the town where he used to live. "I can't think of these things, that is why I come to camp," he continued softly. Borsko had buried the memories of his best friend's tragic death. He had been blown up by a grenade while they were playing together.

Dado, a 10 year old bully, softened with time. He was the leader of a small group of boys and made all of the decisions for them. This was often very frustrating for everyone. When he took my hand one evening on the way to the disco, I knew that he had taken giant steps.

The evening disco allowed the children to be free and to unwind. They loved it. There was a theme and program every night. The shell leis I brought from Hawai'i were a hit. New friendships developed and would continue after the camp was over. After 2 weeks we had memorized the Croatian words to the pop songs that echoed under the moonlight. The children fell asleep exhausted.

Most of my advice as one of the two camp physicians was based on my experiences as a mother of three athletic children rather than as an obstetrician gynecologist. Initially we were so busy treating minor ailments that we had to remind the group leaders how to parent and when a physician was really necessary. We passed out Band-Aids and reviewed their placebo effect. I also had to demonstrate to my compassionate Italian psychiatrist partner how to give liquid Tylenol with a dropper. Tonsillitis, balanitis, and a moderate reaction to a bee sting which required the use of the emergency epinephrine kit were among the significant medical problems that we encountered.

Our first major medical challenge was Marina whose headache had persisted all morning on the day she was to be interviewed for a documentary. At 12-1/2 years old she was our youngest but very mature junior volunteer. Her father was still one of those listed as missing in action. The Red Cross and other organizations seemed to be doing a relatively good job of keeping track of soldiers, families and refugees, but the whereabouts of her father had not been known since 1993 and many presumed him dead or a prisoner. Marina would never give up hope. This was her third summer camp. She had been interviewed previously and was known by all of us from the original video of the Global Children's Organization. She was excited that she would be interviewed again but her headache worsened and now was accompanied by vomiting and fever. With the nature and progression of her symptoms a diagnosis of viral flu syndrome was made. We were summoned every 10 minutes with an update on her condition. It was upsetting to see Marina so sick, the staff was impatient and wanted her better and many suggested we give her some sort of medication to make her well. Again we insisted that they monitor her condition, keep her comfortable, let her sleep, and most of all be patient. She was so loved by everyone at the Camp that it was hard to just sit back and watch. Two days later she was able to join us for lunch and her beautiful smile reappeared.

The 2 weeks of camp flew by. We all knew parting would be difficult. Crying was a common occurrence but also felt good. How many of the boys in my group would reach manhood, I wondered? We all gained from this experience. Jadranko appeared to gain the most as his tense muscles relaxed while he held the young orphans in his arms. His flashbacks had diminished.

Melita, another junior volunteer, joined us on the bus back to the ferry. She would leave us in Split and head for Zagreb to visit her father who had been recently drafted again into the Croatian army during the first week of camp. Men were eligible for the draft until the age of 60 and he was 45 years old. Faces were wet with tears as we said our good-byes in Split to Melita, other volunteers, and the children. The future was unknown for these beautiful human beings, but the memories we created would be with all of us forever.

Dr Paniccia and I escorted Dajan, Nina and four other children home and were the guests of their families in a refugee camp on the outskirts of Split. The "camp" was actually a group of wooden buildings which appeared as though they had been previously used as a motel or vacation spot on the Adriatic Sea. Nina's family of four shared one room and her cousin's family of five was lucky to have two rooms with three teenagers in one room and their parents in a partitioned-off communal kitchen to create some privacy for their bed. A common bathroom was outside, up two flights of stairs, and shared by 30 people. Two years earlier this had been temporary housing for Dajan's family after they fled Bugojno in Bosnia.

These refugees realized they were fortunate to be alive. Although they were Croatian, they were still outsiders and not accepted by the local community. The children were teased in school, and their parents, who were my age, could not get work. Happy to be alive, but depressed and idle, they spent their days staring out to sea, smoking one pack of cigarettes after another. Some of them had been professionals, artists, writers, merchants, and farmers. They were in the prime of their lives and had lost almost everything. Sitting with them and sharing stories of our lives was very difficult.

Each family cooked us a special meal. The freshness of the tomato wedges and onion slices were unsurpassed. We could not stop laughing as the women with their limited English demonstrated how to roll out the filo to make the *burek* which was a delectable layered potato and cheese pie. Within 4 hours we ate three separate dinners. We talked of the options for their futures. Should their children consider schooling in America? Since they were already displaced what effect would this have on their family life? Their children brought them such tremendous joy that they could not bear to lose them. Instead, they would try to cope with their dilemma, live with the hope that the near future would bring peace, and maybe, someday, they could return to their homes in Bosnia.

The commuter bus was packed with standing room only as we headed back to the pier where the ferry to Ancona, Italy awaited us. Once aboard, I wondered how I would process the events and recover from the tremendous emotional upheavals that had occurred within me during the previous 3 weeks. I went out on deck for a deep breath. Gazing into the majestic sky, I was overcome by the huge full moon with its path of light which directed the boat through the spattering of islands along the Croatian coastline. Funny, it was the same moon, the same bright light, that often woke me as it pierced my bedroom window in Manoa Valley. Now, though, it was accompanied by the sound of waves lapping at the sides of the boat, and I was not at all concerned about what effect it might have on my pregnant patients in Honolulu.